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# Food & Nutrition

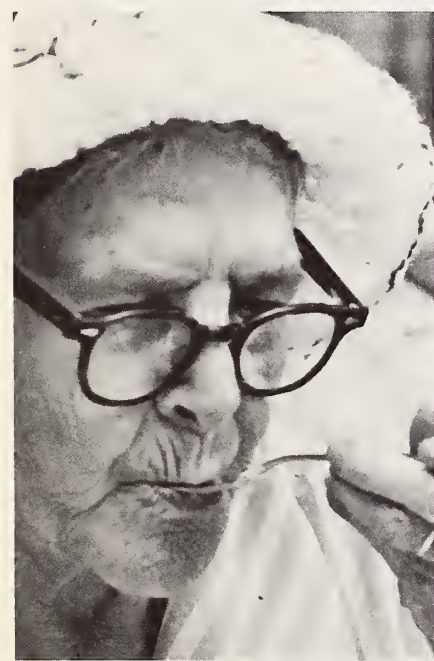
## DELTSVILLE STACKS

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Through the food distribution program, the Department of Agriculture has been providing food for people and help for farmers for 45 years. Last year,

working through State commodity offices, USDA supplied close to



\$1 billion worth of food to schools, child care centers,

summer camps for children, nutrition programs for the elderly, and institutions

such as hospitals and prisons. This entire

issue is devoted to food distribution — how it works, who benefits, what the problems are, and what people are doing to solve them.







# Help for Farmers

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## **The agricultural connection....**

The agricultural basis for food distribution has remained basically the same since USDA first began buying foods to help farmers hurt by the Great Depression.

USDA carefully times commodity purchases to remove surpluses from marketing channels when they will do the most good for farm prices. In this way, price support and surplus removal activities stabilize American agricultural supplies and prices.



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According to J.W. Chloupek, State commodities director for Nebraska, the agricultural connection is a "selling point" for food distribution, since almost all States have something to sell.

"Whether it is fresh apples in Washington State or great northern beans in western Nebraska, USDA can come in and buy those crops where the depressed market is," he said. "Last year USDA bought \$54 million worth of food in Nebraska—that's a nice chunk."

Because the agricultural stabilization function of the program is so strong, an important part of USDA's role is to try to reconcile the needs of farmers with those of people who use the food in local communities.

Darrel Gray, director of the food distribution division in USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, explains: "We have very little money to buy food for other than price support or surplus removal purposes. Last year, it amounted to about 8 percent of the total. As a result, we cannot always buy the kinds of foods schools and institutions want most, because many of these foods don't fall into surplus removal or price support categories."

"We are constantly trying to match the desires of the schools with the needs of the farm community," he said. "It takes a tremendous amount of teamwork and understanding."

## Who gets USDA foods?

Over the years, the emphasis of the food distribution program has changed from simply distributing surplus foods to providing a sophisticated system that gets the right kinds of foods to the people who need them.

Currently schools get 86 percent of the foods donated by USDA. Each year schools get a specific level of commodity assistance, or entitlement. For example, last year schools got 15.75 cents worth of





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donated foods for each meal they served. These foods included a variety of items, such as ground beef, pork, chicken, dried beans, fruits and vegetables, and juices.

"USDA is now distributing 57 different foods on an entitlement basis," Gray explained. "That's twice as many as a decade ago."

In addition to their entitlement, schools can get certain "bonus" items—currently, non-fat dry milk, butter, cheddar cheese, and process cheese. USDA provides States with as much of these bonus items as they can use without waste.

While schools get the largest percentage of USDA foods, States also use the foods for a variety of other nutrition programs. Child care centers participating in the Child Care Food Program qualify for donated foods, as do sponsors of the Summer Food Service Program, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, and nutrition programs for the elderly.

Nearly all counties now assist needy families with food stamps rather than donated foods. However, there are some areas that still operate food distribution programs. Currently, the program serves low-income families on 75 Indian reservations in 18 States, and in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

In addition to using USDA foods for programs that get regular donated food assistance, States use the USDA foods stored in their warehouses to provide meals for victims of natural disasters.

## **From producer to user. . .**

Getting food to local communities begins with Federal people who make the purchases and arrange for shipment to the States. State distributing agents decide how to get the foods to schools and institutions. And local food

service managers plan how to store and use the foods.

As Darrel Gray explains, because there's no one direct line of authority or communication, responding to problems within the food distribution system can sometimes be difficult.

Gray's agency, the Food and Nutrition Service, is one of three USDA agencies involved in the food distribution effort. FNS assesses the needs and wants of schools and institutions and coordinates delivery of donated foods to the various State agencies.

Another USDA agency, the Food Safety and Quality Service (FSQS), buys the surplus removal foods—

such as poultry, meats, fruits, and vegetables—which make up about two-thirds of the foods schools get from USDA. FSQS also certifies that the foods USDA buys meet high quality specifications.

The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) contracts for the price-support items, such as dairy products and cereals, which make up the remaining third of the commodities schools get.

Each year representatives from the three agencies meet to decide which foods need to be purchased during the coming year. FNS then sends the list out to the State agencies. States send back rough estimates of what their schools and institutions can use. USDA then arranges for commodities to be taken





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out of inventories or, through FSQS and ASCS, invites bids from suppliers on the open market. After the food is purchased, the ASCS Kansas City Commodity Office arranges for delivery from suppliers or USDA warehouse stocks to the States.

While FNS pays for delivery to State warehouses or railcar unloading sites, State agencies arrange and pay for handling, storage, and delivery from the distribution sites to schools and institutions. States cover administrative costs of handling the commodities either by charging an assessment fee to recipient agencies, or, in a few cases, by using funds appropriated by State legislatures.

"Most of the States have an assessment charge to cover the costs of the program," said Darrel Gray. "There's a wide range of charges from State to State, and a wide range of services provided. We have found, in States that work hard to smooth the flow of commodities—particularly those that have central warehouses and adequate staffing—school food service people feel pretty positive about the program."

## **Making deliveries more reliable**

At the national level, USDA has been working to make deliveries more reliable. "Because of unpredictable shipments, many times State and local people haven't known soon enough what food USDA has purchased and when they could expect to receive it," said Gray.

"This created problems in planning. They have to have somebody at the warehouse to unload. They have to plan, not only for unloading, but for warehouse space. And schools have to know what they'll need to buy."

"One of the things we continually fight is shipping," agreed Jim Chloupek. "We don't always know



**USDA carefully times commodity purchases to remove surpluses from marketing channels when they will do the most good for farm prices.**

when the food's coming. And when you look at the major city schools, who are really in big business and have no reasonable idea when the food is coming, you can see where it's frustrating."

USDA has made several improvements in the program in recent years to counter shipment and delivery problems.

Last fall, USDA began providing price support commodities on a "delivery period" basis to help States anticipate when their food will arrive. This means that States can now specify a 2-week period during which they want these commodities to *arrive*. Before, States could only request a 2-week period during which they wanted the commodities *shipped*.

The new delivery period system means more work for the Kansas City Commodity Office, which arranges for all transportation of donated foods, but Gray feels it's worth it. Once USDA refines the system, he would like to see more commodities shipped this way.

Another factor which contributes to concern over shipping is that even when products are shipped on time, State agencies do not always receive notification of arrival times. Notification requirements set up recently should help solve this problem.

## **Helping people use commodities**

In addition to wrestling with food delivery problems, over the past few years USDA people have been working to help schools figure out how to make the best use of donated foods.

The donated foods schools get are basic—cheese, flour, vegetable oil, tomato paste, for instance. Sometimes schools have trouble figuring out how to prepare the foods in ways kids will like.

One solution—that has also saved schools money—has been to enlist the help of processing companies.



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A company can take USDA-donated cheese, flour, vegetable oil and tomato paste, and turn them into . . . pizza. For many schools, faced with limited kitchen facilities and high labor costs, making pizza can be a formidable task.

Schools use processing contracts to get a variety of foods—from hot dog rolls to eggplant parmigian—all at a discounted price. The discount that schools get generally equals the value of the donated foods they supplied the company.

To make sure State agencies and schools get their money's worth—their full dollar's value for their donated foods—USDA has recently issued new regulations that provide careful scrutiny of the processing of donated foods. These regulations will take effect next school year, 1981-82.

USDA has also made some improvements in labeling and food specifications. USDA now requires processors to include their names on all labels for canned fruits and vegetables. "This way," Gray said, "schools can associate quality with packers who do a good job. And, packers can be more aware of schools' needs."

"We're also concerned about the needs of children," Gray added. "In the past few years, we've changed food specifications to limit the amount of salt, sugar, and fat in donated foods. For example, we're buying ground beef with less fat, and fruits packed in light syrup or natural juices. We also now supply whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables when we can."

## **Encouraging State and local changes**

In addition to making changes at the Federal level, USDA has also been working to help State and local commodity managers make changes of their own.

USDA now provides each State with at least \$30,000 a year in administrative expense funds to im-



## **The foods USDA buys go to:**

**Children, through the National School Lunch Program, the Child Care Food Program, and the Summer Food Service Program.**

USDA foods also go to children in nonprofit summer camps, and schools that get USDA commodities but do not participate in the National School Lunch Program.

**Needy households on Indian reservations and in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.**

**Needy people in charitable institutions,** such as hospitals and institutions for mentally or physically handicapped children and adults.

**Elderly people and their spouses,** through nutrition programs for the elderly, authorized by the Older Americans Act.

**Pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants and children** up to 6 years of age who participate in the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, a special nutrition program for mothers and children who are at risk because of low income and poor diet.

**People who live in a declared disaster area,** if they are eligible for meals disaster relief agencies prepare and serve at central locations.

## **USDA purchases and distributes commodities under several legislative authorities:**

**Section 32** (of Public Law 74-320) allows the government to remove surpluses of perishable, nonbasic commodities from normal channels. Commodities usually purchased under Section 32 are fruits, vegetables, meats, and poultry products.

**Section 416** (of the Agricultural Act of 1949) authorizes USDA to donate foods acquired through price support activity. These are generally basic commodities such as dairy products, grains, oils, and peanut products.

**Section 311** (of the Older Americans Act) requires USDA to donate a minimum level in commodities, or cash in lieu of commodities, to nutrition programs for the elderly funded under the Older Americans Act.

**Section 4(a)** (of the Agricultural and Consumer Protection Act) authorizes food distribution to Indians and participants in the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.

**Section 6** (of the National School Lunch Act) requires USDA to provide States with a minimum level of commodity assistance for schools. In the event that full commodity assistance cannot be provided, Section 6 requires USDA to make up any short-fall in commodity assistance with cash in lieu of commodities. Section 6 authorizes USDA to buy a wide variety of preferred items that do not necessarily have to be in surplus.

**Section 14** (of the National School Lunch Act) gives USDA special purchase authority to buy, with funds from Section 32 and Section 416, commodities at current market prices even though they do not meet surplus or price support conditions.



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prove their food distribution programs. "I think this is the real door-opener to improving commodity distribution systems within the States," said Gray, explaining that this is the first time the Federal government has provided any money for State food distribution systems. Since 1979, when States first began getting these funds, they have used the money to buy needed equipment or to hire additional staff, such as processing contracts specialists.

Also in 1979, USDA began providing technical expertise to States through a series of food procurement workshops, held throughout the country. In the workshops, local school food purchasers learn buying skills USDA experts predict could cut their food bills by 10 percent. "This is significant," Gray said. "This year local schools spent nearly \$4 billion on food."

Currently, USDA also is working on a specialized form of technical assistance, tested in three States last year. "We are hiring some real pros as consultants to go in and work one-on-one with State agencies that really want to improve their systems," Gray said. "They're going to look at the existing system, the warehousing, the trucking, and similar problem areas. Then they'll make recommendations on the best way to go."

Only if a State is committed to making improvements will USDA go to the expense of this special assistance. "To the extent the money stretches and a State is serious about making a change, we'll pay for the assistance to make some needed improvements in their food distribution system," Gray said.

He feels many storage problems could be reduced by regular checks on inventories and warehouse conditions. "School districts and States need to go in and review their ware-

houses, complain when conditions are not good, and look for alternatives," he said.

## Outlook for the future

At all levels, people in food distribution are working to make the program more responsive to the needs of local food service people. Many local people, in turn, have responded with greater interest in the commodities program.

For example, in November 1980, Ed Post, Wisconsin's director of food and nutrition services, asked his schools which of three systems of food assistance they would prefer:

- 1) the current commodity program;
- 2) a system that would substitute cash payments for the donated foods schools now get; or
- 3) a letter-of-credit system, under which schools would be authorized to make local purchases of surplus and price support foods.

Post had 176 school food service people respond to his survey. Of these, 162 people preferred the current commodity program, 11 said they would rather have cash, and 3 opted for a letter-of-credit system.

At the same time, Congress is interested in more extensive testing of the options that would provide cash or letters-of-credit in place of donated foods. As a result of 1980 legislation, USDA will be testing the optional systems in a \$2 million pilot project, which will run in 60

schools over the next 3 years.

While many areas of food distribution still need changes, much has been done in recent years to improve the system and get people to share ideas and work together.

"We at FNS aren't doing a perfect job by any means," said Darrel Gray, "but we're making progress."

"We also rely on FSQS and ASCS, the regional offices, the State directors, and the local food service directors to do their job correctly. And, so, if ever there were a program that needed teamwork, it's this one. Everybody plays an important part in this."

"We will never be complacent about this program," Gray added. "No matter how far we progress, there will always be room for improvement and innovation."

by Jane Mattern

*The articles that follow take a closer look at food distribution. Since schools are the biggest users of USDA foods, our main focus is on how schools get, store, and use commodities. We also take a look at how disaster feeding works, and how USDA makes commodity purchases.*

*For more information on the Food and Nutrition Service's role in food distribution, write:*

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# Making commodities work . . . in small, rural schools



LEONA SANDO

San Diego Mission and Jemez Valley are two schools in the San Dias Mountains of New Mexico. Small, rural, isolated, they are typical of many New Mexico schools. Many of the children are Indian, some are Spanish, some Anglo. Planning menus and ordering and buying food can be difficult for rural schools like these. Budgets are frequently as small as the schools.

Lucy Mejia has been food service director at Jemez Valley for 10 years. She has a special interest in the children there. Four of her 14 grandchildren attend the school. But she is interested in all the children. "It makes you feel good when you see them eating real good," she said, smiling at the elementary children coming through the lunch line. "For some of these kids, it's the only meal they have in the morning."

According to Mejia, the free foods from USDA are very helpful. "If it weren't for commodities," she said,

"we would be in the red every once in a while."

Leona Sando runs the food program at the San Diego Mission School. Her budget is tight, too. Two years ago they had to start charging tuition, and budgeting meals for 100 students is not easy. Sando describes the role of USDA-donated foods succinctly: "We couldn't survive without them."

Estelle Gallegos, assistant chief of the New Mexico commodities bureau, agrees. "Those commodities are more important to the smaller schools than to the bigger school districts. Smaller schools have more budgetary problems because they don't have the purchasing power larger schools get by buying in bulk."

## **New Mexico's delivery system**

Although schools such as Jemez Valley and San Diego Mission are small and frequently located in isolated areas, their commodity deliveries are as dependable as those going to large city schools, according to Frank Garcia, chief of the

State commodities bureau. "The only time our trucks will not go is an act of God, bad weather, or maintenance problems," he said.

Under the commodity system in New Mexico, the State delivers USDA-donated foods once a month to each school or institution that uses them. New Mexico stores all USDA-donated foods in a central, State-owned warehouse in Albuquerque. The State has its own rail siding behind the warehouse for receiving USDA shipments, and its own trucks for delivering foods to individual program sites. The State finances local delivery costs.

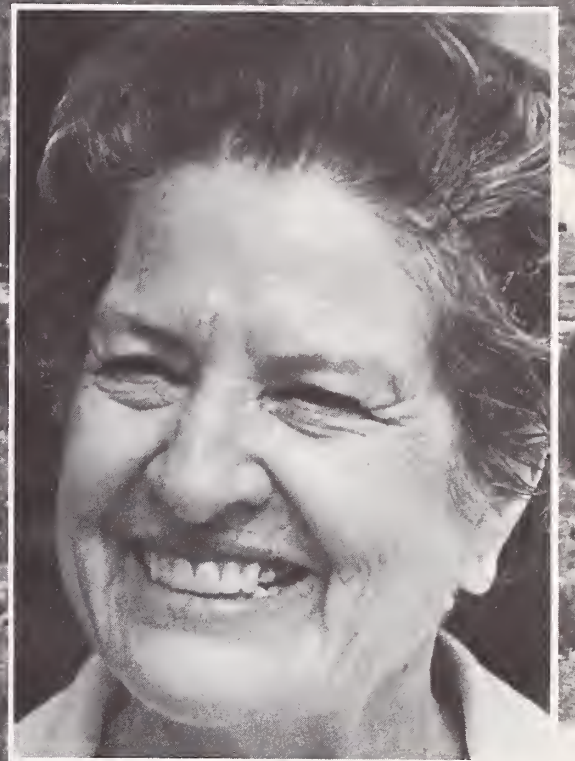
New Mexico's system is unusual, because many States charge assessment fees to schools and institutions to cover the cost of freight, storage, and handling of the donated foods within the State. Only in about five States, including New Mexico, does the State legislature appropriate funds to cover the cost of distributing donated foods.

In addition, some States do not have warehouse facilities to store USDA foods, and require schools and institutions to hire trucks to pick up their commodities at the rail sidings where the foods arrive.

"Our legislators here in New Mexico have been very generous to us," Garcia said. "I guess they feel it's all taxpayers' money, and they probably find it easier for us [the Commodities Bureau], to get the money and run the entire function. For example, if schools would pay us the cost of freight, they would still have to get the money from the State fund."

"Fifty-four percent of New Mexico schools have enrollments under 500, and arranging for shipments would be especially difficult for these small schools. Our small schools mean a lot to us because we have so many," said Estelle Gallegos. "I just can't imagine how they would work it with no delivery system."

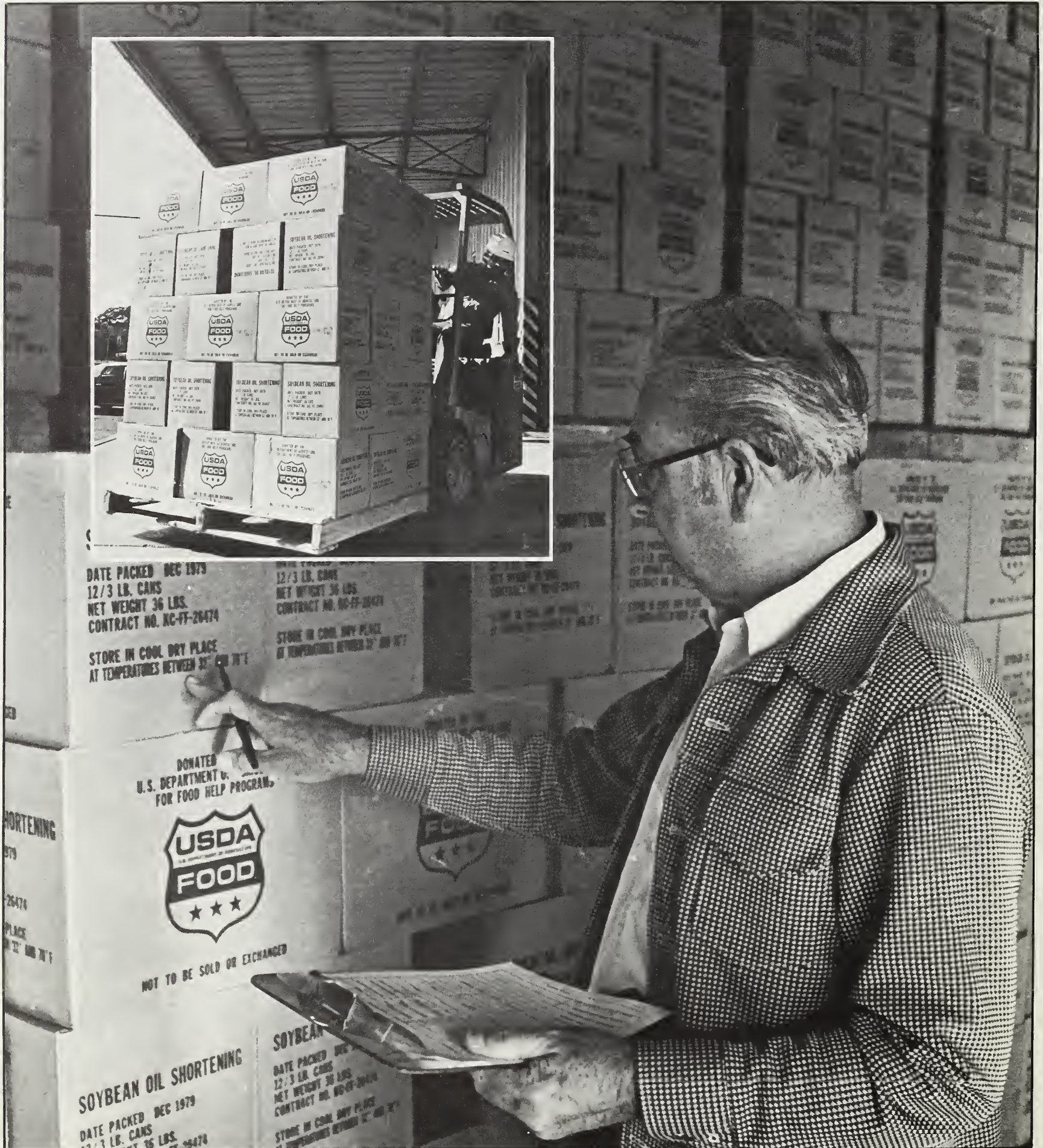




LUCY MEJIA



# Making commodities work... in small, rural schools





## **The central warehouse**

As Frank Garcia strolled through the State warehouse between high stacks of boxes marked "USDA—Pork in Natural Juices" and "USDA—Instant Mashed Potatoes," he told how 17 years ago the warehouse was built and the initial fleet of trucks bought for deliveries. Clearly New Mexico is no newcomer to the theory that a well-financed centralized system can help a commodity program run smoothly.

The warehouse is clean, and the air smells of flour and the white oak pallets on which the boxes of commodities sit. Garcia pointed out the cooler unit for butter and cheese and the deep-freeze for potato rounds and frozen chicken. The warehouse receives and distributes nearly 7,100 tons of food a year.

Garcia picked up a 10-pound sack of flour near a loading operation, and showed where a forklift tong had punctured the side. "We'll repack this and send it out," he said, "because it's good flour, only the package has been damaged. It wouldn't be right to waste it."

New Mexico can ensure monthly commodity deliveries to programs only as long as USDA gets the donated foods to the State on schedule. For Frank Garcia, the biggest problem with USDA-donated foods is shipping. "I think USDA should take a harder stand with vendors and say, 'Look, we want these shipments to reach their destination,'" he said. Sometimes he is not notified of an incoming shipment and has no labor available to unload trucks or railcars.

Frank Garcia, chief of New Mexico's commodities bureau, checks boxes of USDA foods in the central warehouse in Albuquerque.

Garcia pointed to his ledger of commodity shipments, showing pineapple shipped by the vendor almost a month after the promised shipping date, and then another 2 weeks in transit before arriving. He went down the list of foods, pointing out item after item shipped late. "I'm not saying we get set back every time," he said, "but I'm speaking of the instances where it has caused a hardship, especially on items the schools really like."

School food directors are thrown off schedule when an expected shipment of a choice item is late and misses their monthly truckload. When this happens, they are forced to buy these items locally or substitute other foods in their menus.

"In a lot of those cases, I have made special deliveries," Garcia said. "It has cost my department money, but I'm glad to do it, because I hate to see those schools out of special commodities."

To prevent school personnel from planning on commodities that may not arrive, Garcia no longer distributes the list of arrival dates for certain shipments. Instead, he circulates more general information on products that will be available. "I don't want to let my schools know unless I really am sure those commodities are going to get here in time," he said. "I just don't think it's right for me to tell somebody they're going to get something when it may be 2 weeks late."

## **Fair shares for schools**

A problem unique to a system serving small schools is that the fair share, or allocation, of donated foods to a particular school often does not add up to a full case of food. The commodities bureau has to "break cases," or open boxes and divide the goods into smaller portions. "We break cases all the time—constantly," said Gallegos. "Otherwise there is no way we could have a fair share system."

Whether they are serving 30 kids or 30,000 kids, said Garcia, schools and child care centers are entitled to their portion of donated foods. With the organized delivery system set up in the State, commodity bureau trucks cover the area and deliver to small and large alike.

"We have a child care program with a participation of five now—at one point their participation dropped to two—and we're still issuing commodities to them," Gallegos said. "We tell them we won't turn anybody down, because commodities for two is still a can of peaches here and a can of peaches there."

## **Future for processing?**

At the San Diego Mission School, Leona Sando spoke laughingly of the two-burner stove she had for years in the school kitchen before getting the new modern unit.

"Before we had this stove, we used to have the mothers bake bread for us," she said. The Indian mothers baked loaves for the school in the same way they still do their own baking—in the traditional dome-shaped clay ovens outside the homes of the pueblo. "We would take the commodity flour and the lard over to them and they would bake for us—that's how we used to get our bread," Sando explained.

In spite of this early experience with processing donated foods, the practice of processing on a larger scale is not yet popular in New Mexico. The idea of turning USDA donated foods—like flour—over to a food processor and getting the final product—bread, muffins, or rolls—at a discounted price has encountered great resistance in the State.

"We have had very little processing activity to speak of," said Frank Garcia. Currently, New Mexico has



# Making commodities work... in small, rural schools

only two processing contracts—an on-going but little-used contract for cookies and crackers, and a contract with a pizza processor. "I'm waiting to see how well it's going to work," Garcia said. "It looks very good up to now." Last year the State signed a contract for processed turkey products, but only two schools took part.

Commodity bureau personnel in New Mexico have talked to school food service people to pinpoint the reasons for the resistance to processing contracts. "A lot of the cooks told us they would rather work with the product they receive," said Garcia. "It's just that plain."

"You've got more of a homemaker type person in your small schools than you do in the bigger schools," Gallegos concurred. Many small New Mexico schools prefer to make their own foods from scratch, and they have the time to do it.

"Bigger schools probably do not have the time smaller schools have. There is a lot more time and labor involved in feeding 1,000 kids than there is in feeding 200," Gallegos said.

But even small schools usually don't object to convenience. One of the cooks at Jemez Valley School, leaning back on a momentary break and wiping her forehead, spoke of staying late into the afternoon to soak beans for the following day's meal. Maybe, she said, some processed items might be helpful.

Gallegos feels the State staff needs to learn more about processing contracts so they can help schools benefit from them. "I think, at this point, food service directors don't really understand how far you can use your imagination and what

things you can do. We're going to have to learn from our regional people through Washington, and then we'll be able to talk more about processing contracts."

"We're trying to give schools all the information possible," said Garcia. "Being truthful about it, maybe some have known their options with processing and some have not. Now after they go at it the first time, maybe they'll have a different outlook."

As a part of the educational effort, Gallegos held 15 sessions on commodities for food service people this year. She briefed them on commodity orders, allocations, transportation schedules, and storage. Three representatives of processing companies answered questions about processing.

## **Making commodities taste good**

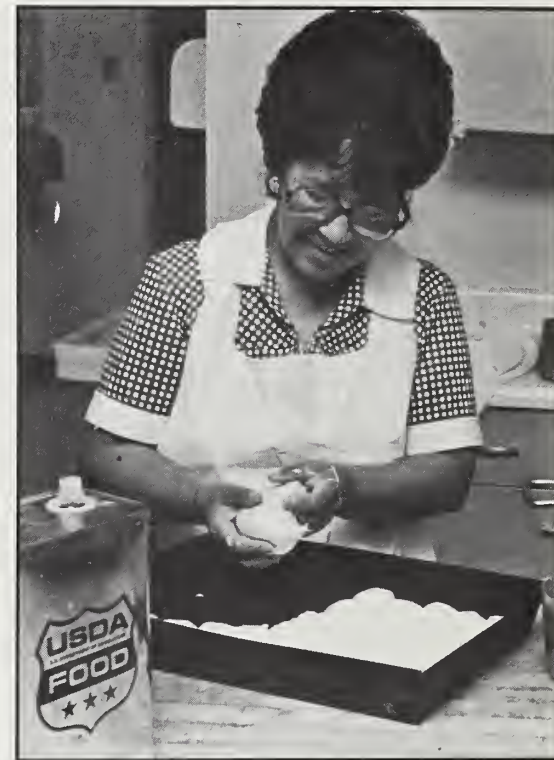
While delighted to receive choice items, like beef, and basics, like flour and butter, New Mexico food service people are often frustrated by the task of trying to figure out how to use other items USDA sends—such as giant tins of cranberry sauce and 50-pound boxes of dry milk.

"Our biggest problem with commodities is that people don't have enough imagination to use them," said Gallegos.

"Some people are terrific. They have all these different ways of using turkey rolls, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes—the problem items. Others say, 'Hey, I don't know what to do with them. They're just sitting in my storage.'

"I would like to see us train food service directors to use commodities," Gallegos continued. "We need to work on getting recipes out to the schools and on having people share ideas."

Leona Sando is always on the lookout for new recipes to help her use her commodities. She tried a recipe for spaghetti casserole she



got from a pamphlet given out by a food store, and the children at San Diego Mission School cleaned their plates. "Usually the new stuff they don't like, but they really liked this one," she said.

Sando has a number of ways to use less popular items. For example, she made a sweet potato pie, which the students loved because they thought it was pumpkin. "We've tried putting the cranberry sauce into orange juice—that worked pretty well—and into jello."

Of the donated foods USDA provides, Lucy Mejia uses "mostly everything but one or two items." A few foods she finds difficult to use.

"Last year I was having a lot of trouble with my cranberry sauce, because I didn't have too many recipes," she said. "But I got a few recipes. We make some jello. We have it with turkey. But mostly we use it in cranberry crunch, a dessert bar with fruit filling. The kids really





**Left:** Freshly baked rolls, made with USDA-donated flour and oil, are often on the menu at Jemez Valley.

**Right:** The Jemez Valley School staff serves food through an open window at the end of the serving line. About 500 children eat lunch at the school each day.

love it. I used to call it cherry crunch so the kids wouldn't know it was cranberries," she laughed.

Turkey rolls—a problem food in many New Mexico schools because school food directors claim students won't eat them—are one of Lucy Mejia's favorite donated foods.

"Oh yes, I couldn't get enough," she said. "I make turkey pies—another dish the kids really like. I cream turkey and put it over mashed potatoes. Or sometimes I just slice it and serve it to them with gravy and mashed potatoes, and it really goes. I don't have any problem getting rid of it."

### Changing the status quo

In spite of Lucy Mejia's imagination and skill in using commodities, she does sometimes end up with donated foods she just can't use. Mejia is currently working with Estelle Gallegos to arrange a transfer to other schools of an over-supply of rolled oats and rolled wheat.

"I think I'm over-ordering," Mejia said. "At first I didn't understand, you know, so I ordered quite a few things. That's how I ended up with a lot more than I really need."

Because over-ordering of staple items is a common problem, Gallegos has set up a new system for ordering the "open-order" foods—such as dairy products. Schools can get as much of the open-order foods as they can use without waste.

"We're now having them order on a quarterly basis the items that are open-order foods," said Gallegos. "We were having trouble before because we were making decisions at the State level without getting information from the schools. We decided to remedy that and come out with commodity order forms."

"That's working a lot better," Gallegos said. "I think they're having trouble estimating, but I think they will learn as time goes on. They've never had to sit down and say, 'Hey, this is how much I need.' They just wanted to have it there and make sure they had enough."

Gallegos' biggest problem now is getting school food people to fill in

the forms. "You can bug them and bug them, and send them memos, and tell them, 'If you don't order you won't get any commodities.' But some people just don't send anything back."

Lucy Mejia says she's learning to work with the new forms. "After we get the hang of it," she says, "I think it will work."

The New Mexico commodity office supplies USDA foods to 650 schools. For more information on New Mexico's food distribution program, write:

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Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103  
*by Jane Mattern*



# Making commodities work... in large big city schools

**"CAUTION NOISE: Wear your ear protectors"** reads the sign posted on the office door of Liz Cagan, chief administrator of the mammoth school food program that provides more than 92 million lunches and 17 million breakfasts to New York City schoolchildren each year.



LIZ CAGAN

Those who work with and know Liz Cagan understand what's behind the playful sign. But uninitiated visitors may find themselves unprepared for the blast of enthusiastic, good-natured managerial genius that comes with sharp orders, shrewd winks, and a large dose of warm, funny stories from the lady behind the cluttered desk.

Liz Cagan has run the New York City school food program since 1977. When she came, the program was plagued by debts, outmoded equipment, and poor participation. In 3 years, she has balanced the budget, boosted participation, and instituted new buying practices for contracts that total nearly \$59 million a year.

In the process, she has become nationally known for her innovative and high quality lunch program. And she has shown how effective use of USDA commodities can help a massive, problem-ridden, big city program run in the black again.

She is, according to New York State commodities director Ernie Berger, probably the staunchest supporter of USDA commodities of any school food service supervisor in the country.

## Changing attitudes

When Cagan became food service director, New York City schools were not making full use of the USDA-donated foods the district got through the State commodity office. The district operated from a central budget, and commodities went to schools that were willing to use them.

As Cagan saw it, before the city could fully use its annual \$14 million entitlement of USDA foods, one important change had to happen—the school food directors had to start regarding commodities as a vital part of their programs.

Cagan put the more than 1,000 schools on individual budgets, and let individual food service managers wrestle with the task of making ends meet. Apparently her strategy worked: "Since schools have been on budgets," Cagan said, "they are all using commodities—every one of them—and they are making things from scratch."

She was astonished that schools had made such little use of commodities in the past. She remembers getting angry with her staff when she first put the budget change into effect. "I said, 'My God, you mean all these years you had a pot of gold, nobody watched costs, and you had such lousy menus?'" Throwing up her hands with a burst of laughter, she added, "They're having much better menus now with less money."

Tight budgeting gave Cagan a chance to assess the costs of different types of food service operations. When she first took over as chief administrator, more than one-third of the schools served preplated frozen meals prepared by meal-pack companies. Cagan feels the preplated frozen meals were one main reason why many children weren't eating school lunches. She eliminated the preplated meals, and now schools either prepare and serve meals from their own kitchens or receive meals prepared in nearby schools.

Now that schools are preparing the food, Cagan feels they are making better use of commodities. Schools could have provided commodities to meal-pack companies and received preplated meals at a discount, but it wasn't done very often. When it was done, the savings weren't significant.

Cagan estimated that she could have saved about 5 cents on a preplated meal using commodities. By having kitchens use the same commodities and prepare the food themselves, she saved about three times that amount.

"What a difference!" Cagan said, reaching for the schools' monthly cost summary and pointing to one school where total food costs averaged 51 cents a meal. The average value of commodities used at that school was 26 cents a meal—more than half of food costs.

There's no question that commodities are essential, Cagan said. "I couldn't possibly have paid 50 cents for food out of the 98-cent maximum reimbursement I got for that meal—our labor was almost 50 cents a meal."



## Backlogs in the warehouses

Prior to Cagan's administration, no one person was in charge of the commodities program in New York City, according to Ernie Berger. "The truth is, there was a problem — nobody was in control," the State director said. "They didn't have anybody that had direct day-to-day responsibility for the commodities."

With no one assessing overall inventories and needs, the city had accumulated huge stockpiles of some foods, which ran up tremendous warehousing charges in the commercial storage facilities the city must use.

"Liz has a famous story about having enough salad oil to pour on every beachhead in the United States," said Berger. "So if we're ever attacked, the tanks would slip and not be able to invade."

Cagan backs this up with more realistic accounts of the over-supplies of hard-to-use commodities stacked in New York City warehouses when she first took over. "When I came, there was a stockpile of 3 to 4 years worth of lemon concentrate," she said. "We got a company to take our concentrate and make it, according to our specifications, into lemonade."

The idea worked so well that Cagan scouted neighboring States for food service directors who were having trouble using their lemon concentrate. With the help of State commodities director Berger, who arranged the transfer, soon Cagan was getting all the lemon concentrate from New Jersey, from Connecticut, and from anywhere no one wanted it.

But in the process, Cagan shared her secret for turning the concentrate into lemonade, and the food service directors she had borrowed from began to make their own. "In a way I lost," Cagan said, "but I was glad because they were learning."

Another case involved USDA-donated peanuts. "When I came in, like other people, we were sitting with thousands and thousands of pounds of peanuts," she said. "Well, what do we do?" Then they got raisins in and decided to package the peanuts and raisins as snacks.

"The first year, to get rid of the backlog, we had a company mix the two and put the mixture into little baggies with the sealed top. We now can ship peanuts and raisins into the schools in bulk, provide baggies, and the food service women make up their snacks."

Cagan's snack-mix plan had to be altered last year, though, when USDA sent raisins already boxed.

Cagan has used imagination and insight in clearing out the excesses of commodities she inherited. And,



New York City uses USDA-donated foods to get a variety of processed items at a reduced cost. A processing plant takes whole USDA turkeys and makes turkey roasts, turkey rolls, turkey frankfurters, and other products for schools.

to make sure the commodities program has the supervision it needs, she has given director of procurement Vincent Romano and his assistant Bruce Hoffman direct responsibility for USDA commodities, as well as for all purchases made for the school food programs. With Romano and Hoffman in charge of ordering the commodities from the State, the city can be sure of getting only what schools can use.

## Promoting processing

One of the most efficient tools New York City has used to get commodities out of the warehouses and onto the menus has been processing contracts. Processed items made with donated foods have also helped give New York City food service managers the margin they need to stay within their budgets.

"When you use a processed product that contains a donated commodity, you can afford it," said Bruce Hoffman. "If you always had to go out and, say, buy fried chicken, you couldn't serve it in your school. But if you have donated chicken processed into fried chicken, you can afford it maybe once a month, or whatever."

The State commodity office offers school districts a wide variety of processed foods—from milk shakes and ice cream made from donated dry milk, to baked, stuffed eggplant, made from donated tomato juice, cheese, and tomato paste.

Schools can also enter some processing agreements separately, if they want to process an item not available through a State contract. This year New York City is processing donated cheese into toasted cheese sandwiches, beef into patties, and lemon concentrate into lemonade. The State office provides



# Making commodities work . . . in large big city schools



Cutting up and cooking whole turkeys used to be a week-long procedure for New York schools. Now all the work is done at the plant. The city gets some 400,000 pounds of turkey franks a year.

a standard processing agreement form for the contracts.

In addition to helping schools cut costs, processing can also help make products easier to handle, according to Cagan. "Like hamburgers," she said, "imagine getting 500 pounds of meat you're going to have to take out of the freezer at least 24 hours ahead of time to defrost and make into patties."

"No question about it," she added, "the processed donated products cut down on labor costs, and the yields are better also."

The New York district is particularly pleased with the processed products made from donated whole turkeys. Through a State contract,

New York City gets a variety of turkey products, including turkey roasts, turkey rolls, and some 400,000 pounds a year of turkey frankfurters. "Now there is no way in the world you could have all of these things if you had to pay cash for them, you know, with the prices today on these items," Cagan said.

Bruce Hoffman described truck after truck of the New York City turkey allocation pulling up to the processing plant. "You wouldn't believe what they do to that little turkey!" he said. "We get something like a 76 percent yield."

"I was so impressed," Cagan said. "There's no way in the world—with all the training in the world—that we could get our people to do this kind of yield."

"It really gives you a flavor of what can be done with processing," she said. "Years ago, all USDA did was send whole turkeys, and in New York (City), none of our schools have the facilities to bake all those turkeys at the same time. Because you're making lunch for 1,000 or 1,500 kids, it would take a whole week to try to prepare one meal."



"It's usually a week-long procedure," agreed Bruce Hoffman. "You have to defrost them, you have to cook them, you have to cut them. You start on Monday and you serve it on Friday."

"What happened was that our schools were only serving turkey on Thanksgiving and Christmas, because it became a very big chore," said Cagan.

## **"Getting your money's worth"**

The New York staff demands accountability from the processors they deal with. "On whatever level you are, you have a responsibility to make sure you're getting your money's worth," Cagan said. "Even though we get an allocation of food, it's still money to us."

"We have to double-check. The same records the companies are supposed to be keeping, and Ernie Berger from the State keeps, we keep," she said. Cagan's hard-line philosophy on accountability is



clearly one reason why processing contracts have worked so well for New York City.

Cagan has had the product specifications revised for all food served in the New York City school cafeterias. Schools now serve only natural ingredients—no artificial colors or flavors—and only foods low in sugar and fat. Manufacturers have scrambled to develop new products that meet the specifications.

"We set our goals a little ahead of the Federal government," she said, recalling the first year she changed the requirement for the packing liquid on canned fruit. "We had to refuse a lot of the donated fruit, when my specification called for natural juices and rejected anything in heavy syrup.

She bought canned fruit that year, and the canners ran out. "We took the entire commercial lot of natural juices produced nationally, since they didn't can enough." The following year USDA changed the specification for commodity fruit to be packed in natural juices or light syrup.

#### **A bounty for a warehouse**

The one big expense New York City has with donated foods is storage. "We've been in commercial warehouses, one frozen and one dry, and the costs have become astronomical," Cagan said. Last year she paid nearly \$500,000 for storage of USDA foods, plus almost \$300,000 for associated handling, delivery, and insurance.

According to Vincent Romano, warehousing costs could be reduced for the city if deliveries of USDA-donated foods were more reliable. If expected shipments could be announced to school food service directors in advance, they could plan their orders ahead of time, and commodities could be moved swiftly through the warehouse once they arrive.

"But with conditions being what they are—with railroads, trucking, local agency, State agency, Federal agency—it just doesn't work like that," said Bruce Hoffman.

"USDA does not get priority for shipping, so companies say food is going to be shipped out starting at a certain time, but it could sometimes be a month or 6 weeks before it ever arrived," Cagan explained.

"When I came," she added, "I found people planning menus, then the stuff wouldn't arrive. So I said, 'No notice goes out until the food is in our warehouse.'"

"Now, once it does come in, phone calls and memos go out immediately, telling people, 'Hey, it's here, you can have it,'" Hoffman said. "So we try not to pay storage on it. We try to move it out as fast as possible."

Cagan is hopeful that shipping will become more reliable with USDA's plan to provide some commodities on a delivery period basis. Under this plan, vendors are committed to delivering commodities within a 2-week span, rather than simply shipping them from the point of origin within a 2-week span.

Being large gives New York City an advantage over smaller school districts with regard to commodity deliveries. "We're in a unique position," said Hoffman. "We're big enough to control our deliveries. We take them into our own warehouse by truck and rail." The large volume of food New York City uses also gives the district a flexibility in local purchasing, and that helps offset erratic deliveries of government commodities.

"We can switch from day to day. We can go from purchased chicken to donated chicken if I find out we're getting chicken tomorrow," said Romano.

"We have that clause built into our contracts. If donated commodities become available, we're not obligated to purchase whatever quantities are stated in the bid," Hoffman said. "And if a commodity order doesn't come in, we can up the quantity we buy."

According to Cagan, part of the warehousing problem New York City faces will be alleviated by State commodity director Berger's plan to build or lease another State warehouse in the city.

"He's left it up to us to find anything that's convenient to us, and he will rent us the space by the square footage, not by commodity movement in and out," Cagan said. "That, I estimate, should save us between \$250,000 and \$300,000 a year. I think I'm going to tell all my people, 'I'm going to give you a \$10 bonus—I'll give you a bounty if you find us a warehouse.'"

#### **"Knowledge, togetherness"**

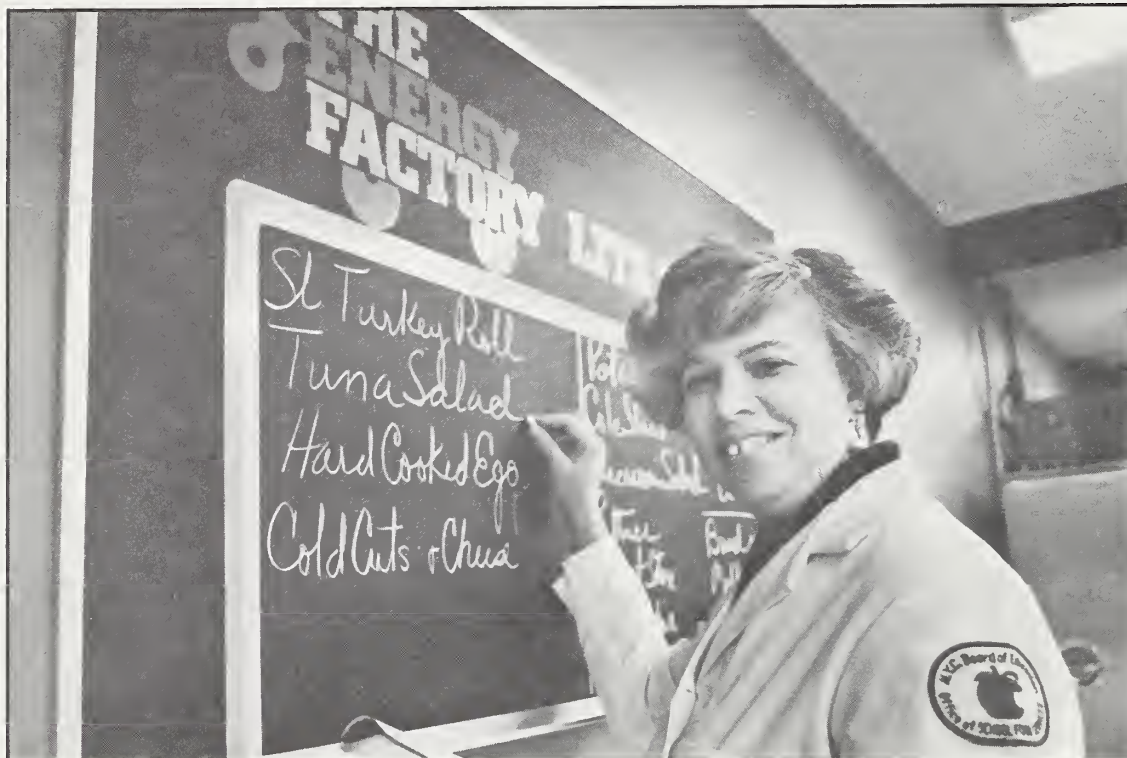
With an eye for minute detail and broad-based budgeting, Cagan has gotten the administration of the New York City school food program into line. She has combined her management expertise with an attitude of caring about both the people on her staff and the students.

She encourages letters from students, and she stays on top of complaints from her food service supervisors. She has also opened the door to student and parent selection of menus. Participation in the lunch program in the city rose from 54.5 percent of student enrollment in the 1976-1977 school year to 67.6 percent last year.

Cagan has been an enthusiastic supporter of the "Energy Factory" concept, which emphasizes getting students involved in planning menus, designing their own lunchrooms, and learning about food and



# Making commodities work... in large big city schools



At Benjamin Franklin School's Energy Factory, students have a choice of three lunch menus. On a day this winter, the "lite lunch" selections included sliced turkey roll made from USDA-donated turkeys.

nutrition. Three schools in the city are currently running Energy Factories, which like other lunch programs, are made possible in part by the availability of USDA-donated foods.

"We couldn't have done it without the amount of donated foods we got," said Lorraine Chambers, cafeteria manager at Benjamin Franklin High School in Harlem, a school previously noted for vandalism, drug abuse, and low attendance. The Energy Factory lunchroom has given students at Benjamin Franklin a sense of pride

and belonging that has had a positive effect academically, socially, and personally for many students, according to Cagan.

The idea of student involvement is a reflection of Cagan's own unquenchable energy, which has not dimmed since the days when she was a high school principal herself. "I tell them, 'Treat these kids like they were your own children,'" she said, as she walked into the kitchen at Benjamin Franklin High, greeting all the cooks by first names and hugging Lorraine Chambers.

Students clustered around her, and in return for their "Hello, Mrs. Cagan," got hugs and warm smiles and comments. To a pretty student in a green and buff warm-up suit with green and buff shoelaces in her sneakers, Cagan asked, "Do you change those shoelaces with every outfit you wear?"

The student smiled shyly, and answered, "Of course."

"I thought so," said Cagan, and strode through the lunchroom, very much in her element among the children. "Look at this, they've done it all themselves!"

Orderly students lined up and patiently waited for their lunches, monitored by fellow students. The atmosphere was busy, but subdued, the talk constant, but quiet. The lunchroom is their design, their project, and they were quite obviously proud of it.

## Shareholders in their school

The high schoolers standing in line were in a very true sense shareholders in their school. They proudly showed scrapbooks with snapshots of the dreary cafeteria where students at Benjamin Franklin ate 2 years ago—the crumbling ceiling tiles, drab walls. During the summer of 1978, the students remade their lunchroom.

They planned the layout for the cafeteria and student lounge, ordered furniture, learned about menus. They painted the walls of the cafeteria bright orange and green and blue, and tied the color scheme together with bold modern designs which were blueprinted by student artists. Among them is a wall-size rendition of the Energy Factory motto, "Knowledge, Togetherness, Unlimited."

"When they finished," said Cagan, "the kids looked at their own attractive lunchroom and saw that the teachers' food line and lunchroom was as dingy as theirs had been to start with. The kids said, 'Who will want to teach after eating in a place like that!' So on their own initiative and their own time, the kids painted the teachers' lunchroom and made curtains for the windows.

"Even the cost end of this thing was tackled by the student committees," Cagan said. "I gave them a nutrient book, and told them, 'This is what we want you to have in your meals over the week—so much iron, so much fat. . .and they found it fascinating.' 'Why don't we do this in our math class, in our science class,' they asked, because it was meaningful."



The students conducted preference tests to decide what kinds of food would be served in the lunch lines, and their system is still in use at the Benjamin Franklin Energy Factory. Students have three options for lunch, all of which often include donated foods or processed items made with donated foods. There is: a fast food lunch of hamburgers, cheeseburgers, and fortified french fries and milkshake; a hot plate with entree and vegetable; or a do-it-yourself salad bar. "The kids don't like to get just one kind of food," said Cagan. "So we let them mix and match—have fast food and salad if they want."

In addition to good food and student input, the Energy Factory lunchroom works because Cagan finds people who are as dedicated and energetic as she is, to run the programs. "What makes it all work is Gene Brown," she said, referring to the counselor, a behavioral specialist, who has been with the Energy Factory program since it started at Benjamin Franklin High. "Gene Brown has made these kids care because he cares."

Brown keeps a close watch on students who are on the Energy Factory committee, to make sure they are working hard at their courses. "They have to show respect, and they have to show improvement," said Brown. "I make them show me their report cards every time, to see how they're doing."

### **Making commodities work for city schools**

Liz Cagan has made the commodity program work for Benjamin Franklin High and other New York City schools. Her success provides an example other big-city school



food directors can emulate in trying to make their own programs effective and accountable.

According to Ernie Berger, one reason Cagan has been able to make commodities work is because she really cared. "She decided she wanted to use commodities, then she went out and did everything she could to use them. But she made that initial decision— Yes, I want to keep them."

For other school lunch managers, Cagan has this advice: "Step number one, you cannot assume that the commodity that comes to you is simply what you open, heat up, and serve, though some may come that way," she said. "I definitely say that cities that want to use

commodities better should coerce their States into going into processing contracts."

Making commodities work is a team effort. In great part, Cagan said, she has success because her State commodity director does every thing possible to help her use donated foods. She is able to do the kind of processing she wants, and she gets orders when she needs them.

Berger feels many cities could benefit from the kind of direct supervision the New York City staff gives its commodities program. "I think in some of these other major cities," said Berger, "if they would get somebody in their offices to handle the program day to day, that could straighten out the internal problems within the district. Then if there are problems at the State level, it's up to the State people to handle that."

At the Federal level, changes are also happening in the food distribution program. "Even though I sometimes fight with USDA, I'm very pleased with the progress I have seen in the past year and a half," said Cagan. "I think there is better communication going on now, and it will continue to improve as people talk with each other."

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*by Jane Mattern*



# From the farm to the lunchroom . . . an unusual USDA purchase



"Platanos," also known as plantains, were described by a 16th century Spanish explorer as "very much like the marrow of the leg-bone of a cow." And that was a compliment.

In fact, plantains are those oversized bananas that people outside of places like Puerto Rico claim don't have any taste. But let a good Spanish cook get to work on them and the lines of knowing connoisseurs will start forming before you can say "tostones y pasteles."

In Puerto Rico, plantain farmers can grow them faster than people

can eat them. And, according to Commonwealth agriculture officials, there's not much market for the crop outside its homeland.

"Our basic problem is that each year we have so many plantains that the surplus drives the price too low, and our farmers cannot earn anything," said Hector Ortiz, assistant marketing coordinator for the Puerto Rico Agricultural Development Administration.

## **A boost for farmers**

In order to give a much-needed boost to a developing Puerto Rican agriculture as well as bring to the mainland the delights of this most

palatable vegetable/fruit, the U.S. Department of Agriculture decided to purchase some 2 million "platanos" for distribution in the National School Lunch Program.

Schools both in Puerto Rico and the States will receive the commodity, purchased under surplus removal authority of Section 32 of the Agricultural Act of 1935.

Ortiz said the government action can have immediate and far-reaching beneficial effects on the island economy. "This plantain purchase by USDA will be, first of all, a great opportunity for our farmers to get a better price for their product this year," he said.



For most Commonwealth farmers, that news is good enough for now.

Jose Rios Rivera is what is known in agriculture circles as a small-acreage farmer. His 3 acres of land consist mostly of plantain plants precariously situated on steep inclines in Puerto Rico's central highlands. He is one of 8,500 island farmers trying to eke out a living on small tracts of land where "platanos" are the chief, and sometimes only, crop.

A quick look at production figures and prices shows that Jose Rios Rivera will not likely grow rich by harvesting plantains. His farm has some 300 plantains plants per acre that produce about 35 "fingers" per stem, one stem per tree, every 9 months. Plantains are easily bruised and will not sell in that condition in the fresh produce market. After culling out a modest number of rejected fruit, his last crop sold for 9 cents apiece.

For the far-reaching economic effects of the USDA purchase, Commonwealth agriculture officials are keeping a close eye on the plantains shipped stateside.

### Something new for students

While the plantains going to the Puerto Rican schools will be prepared in traditional Spanish dishes such as fried tostones and the leaf-encased pasteles, students on the mainland will be offered an entirely new product.

Getting youngsters to try something new is no small task, especially when young palates are not accustomed to the tart plantain as



opposed to its sweeter tasting cousin, the banana. Private industry had a solution.

A Florida-based processing firm offered to cut and peel the plantain, then "infuse" it with orange juice before freezing and shipping.

The as yet unnamed product has received high ratings from New York City and Tampa, Florida, students. The cities held taste tests in school cafeterias that included both Spanish and non-Spanish students.

Ortiz explained that the Commonwealth is hoping that, as a result of the USDA purchase, the plantain/orange juice or some other new product will be a commercial success.

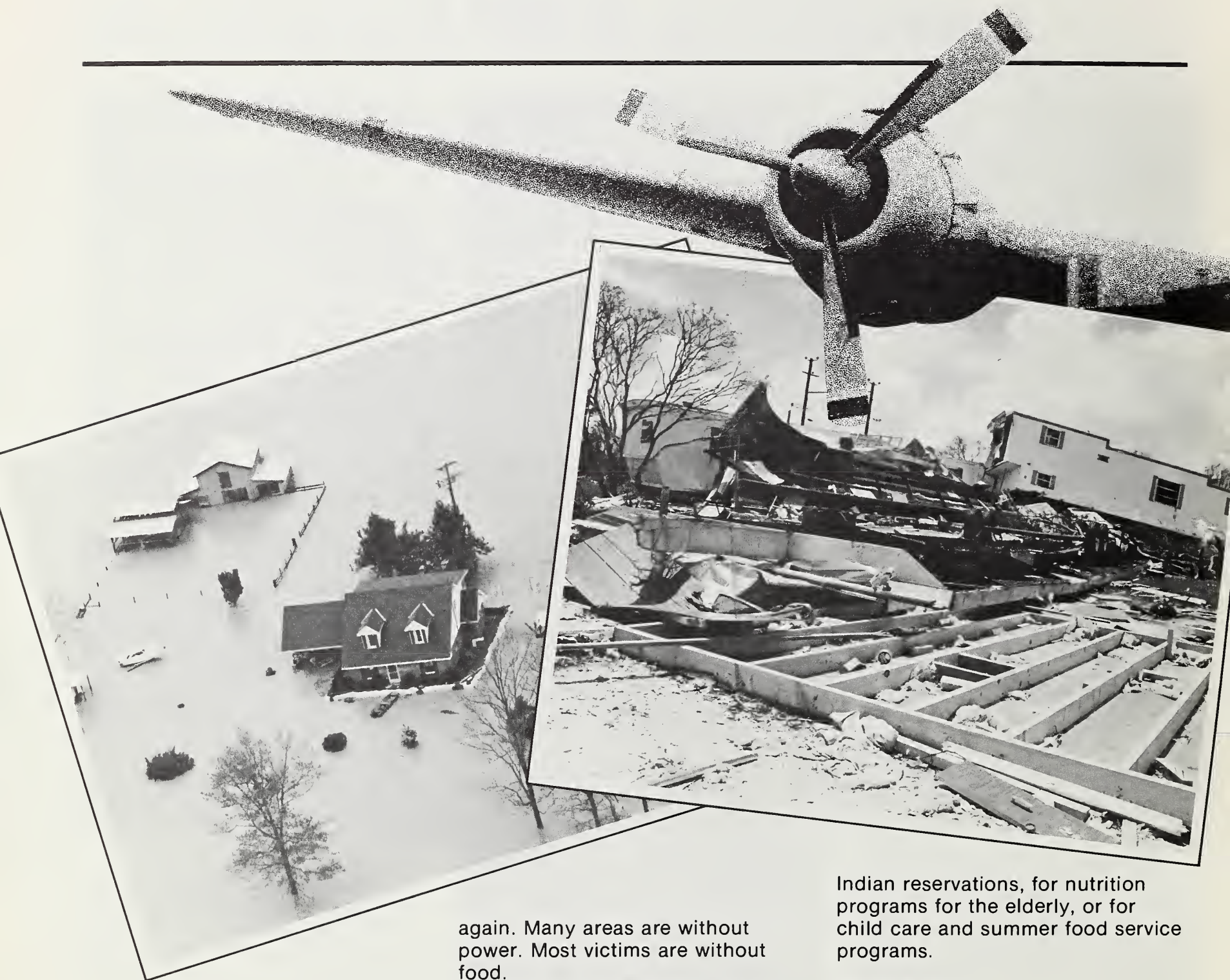
"If this product were to become acceptable on the market, it would greatly assist the Puerto Rican farmer," he said. He would then be able to receive a decent price for his product the year 'round."

*by Joe Dunphy*

In Puerto Rico, schools will be using the plantains in traditional Spanish dishes. But on the mainland, students will get a whole new product — a plantain that has been "injected" with orange juice and frozen.



# Food help in a hurry



**The scene:** the Alabama and Mississippi Gulf Coast, September, 1979. Residents of 16 counties in both States are stunned as Hurricane Frederick rips through their cities and towns, leaving major destruction and loss in its wake.

Many people are left homeless. Few are lucky to salvage any possessions. Those with homes left intact must wait for clean-up operations to make their homes livable

again. Many areas are without power. Most victims are without food.

Within hours, emergency food teams are on hand, providing vitally needed donated food from USDA. By the end of the emergency, relief workers will have dispensed more than 115,000 pounds of commodities to needy Gulf Coast residents.

Whenever disaster strikes, USDA commodities are available to those who need them. The commodities are generally diverted from stocks used to feed children in USDA's National School Lunch Program. Sometimes, however, the food comes from supplies earmarked for

Indian reservations, for nutrition programs for the elderly, or for child care and summer food service programs.

## **Relief teams work fast**

At the outset of an emergency, a disaster relief organization—such as the Red Cross or the Salvation Army—initially sets up shelter locations. Depending on the extent of the disaster, the shelters serve as feeding or housing sites for victims. The relief organization, using its own food supplies, sets up kitchens or conducts mass feeding out of cans. The organization then approaches the State distributing agency and requests the release of





USDA commodities. The types of commodities released depend on the cooking facilities available, and, if the relief organization has stocks of its own, what foods it needs to complement meals.

Foods usually available for disaster aid include: canned meats; vegetables, fruits, and juices; dried beans; peanuts or peanut butter; egg mix; non-fat dry milk; cheese, pasta, flour, or grains; corn syrup; and shortening.

In the aftermath of a disaster, the prevailing atmosphere is one of controlled confusion. All sorts of feeding sites may spring up. Mobile canteens may be set up in vans or trailers, or people may be fed in National Guard armories, tents or churches. A site may open in the

morning and close later in the day. Or a feeding site may open and no one will show up, while another is jam-packed with people.

#### **Whatever is necessary. . .**

Amid all this confusion, workers from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service go wherever they are needed to help State and local agencies with relief activities. In Mobile, Alabama, some FNS staffers handed out sandwiches, while others helped people fill out applications for emergency food stamps.

Whether the emergency is a tornado in Texas, flooding in Mississippi, or an erupting volcano in Washington State, FNS will find a

way to get food to the needy.

In the spring of 1979, heavy rains engulfed the Navajo reservation in the southwest, transforming dirt roads into muddy rivers, and stranding the Navajos, who had no way to reach the trading post to get food. With the help of the National Guard, FNS provided food from a warehouse that stores commodities for California's food distribution program.

FNS also has brought in food from its central warehouse in Kansas City and airlifted commodities from one end of the country to the other, when necessary. The goal is simply to get food to disaster victims—regardless of the physical effort—and to do it fast.  
*by Carolyn Williams*





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